

Sound Expertise – Episode 4

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

Alex Ross, Will Robin

Alex Ross 00:00

I mean one agenda behind the book is to challenge the very simple and dogmatic equation of Wagner with Nazi Germany, Wagner with antisemitism, Wagner with racism, which is absolutely not to deny that those relationships exist, but just to push back against the idea that this is ultimately all that Wagner is about.

[Music] 00:28

Will Robin 00:48

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin. So I'm gonna make this introduction short because what you're going to listen to for the next 50 or so minutes is a bit longer than our usual episodes, and to be perfectly honest, our guest -- New Yorker music critic Alex Ross -- is way, way more interesting than I could ever hope to be. But I do want to say that there has been a vital cultural conversation happening in the past few years about people who make great art and do terrible things, and how we grapple with that art and the people that created it. That conversation is not by any means new. And if there's one historical figure that has long been the prototype for these kinds of discussions, it's the composer Richard Wagner. Wagner is almost synonymous in the public imagination with the reprehensible antisemitism that he publicly espoused, and the ways in which the Nazis drew on his music and ideology for horrible ends. But Hitler and the Third Reich are only one part of Wagner's legacy. The influence of his music and ideas was, and is, enormous, almost beyond belief. And they're still not fully understood, or at least not until now. For the past decade, Alex Ross has been uncovering other legacies of Wagner, other Wagnerisms. He's written a book of breathtaking scope and brilliance, which is coming out this fall, that addresses this precise issue: *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*. Alex has been a longtime friend and mentor, I was honored to be able to read this incredible book as it developed. And I'm very happy to host him for this rich and fascinating conversation.

[Music] 02:22

Will Robin 02:32

So it's been a little over 10 years since *The Rest Is Noise* was completed. And I know you had a second awesome book of essays since then. But I was thinking a little bit about, kind of, *The Rest Is Noise* as this amazing kind of cultural history of 20th century music. And it seems in some ways, like Wagnerism is the next kind of big research project for you after that, is that kind of correct?

Alex Ross 02:59

Yeah, definitely. And I think that Wagnerism was kind of creeping into my sightlines, as I was working on The Rest Is Noise because the topic of Wagner kept surfacing, and sort of intruding on the narrative in a way that... I think it's maybe an interesting sign when you're sort of... when you've finished a big project, and you're thinking about what the next one should be, if there was something in the previous project, which kept distracting you, and sort of, you know, taking you off the main road, that can be a sign that's sort of where you're supposed to go next. I mean, it's sort of the way it was with me, because the first chapter of The Rest Is Noise is the background of music at the very beginning of the 20th century. Obviously, Wagner is this giant figure that Mahler and Strauss and Schoenberg and others were confronting. And then when I reached the Nazi period, in that book, the question of the musical taste of Hitler and the Nazi hierarchy, Wagner, again, played a big role, and so part of me wishes that I'd actually had not spent so much time on those topics in The Rest Is Noise so that there'll be...

Will Robin 04:31

Leave it for the next one!

Alex Ross 04:33

Yes, I wouldn't be retreading the same ground. I was particularly concerned about that when I reached the Nazi Germany chapter of **this** book, but I actually was able to find that I had a different way of going about it...

Will Robin 04:45

They seem really different actually, but no, we'll come back to that. So obviously, one of the most conspicuous things that ... differences between the two books is that Wagnerism is not actually a book about music, in a way, or at least it's part in the shadow of Wagner is I think how you put it. So how did you... Why not music as the central focus, or at least given Wagner's kind of huge influence on composers post Wagner? Why focus on other forms of art, visual art, literature, film, etc?

Alex Ross 05:16

Right. Well, it's obviously a relationship which really interests me, how music affects and is affected by neighboring art forms and the general cultural landscape, political landscape, and that was a central preoccupation of The Rest Is Noise. So I felt as though I was taking up the same kind of relationship and the same question in **this** book, but in a significantly different way, in that it is a book sort of around music, but not about music, per se, or it's about music's effect, principally on artists, writers, architects, visual artists, filmmakers, choreographers, so on and so forth. And then even more widely on intellectual life, political life, but not, not Wagner's influence on subsequent music. And I didn't want to do that, first of all, because it would have just made the book even more... [laughs]

Will Robin 06:27

It's a long book, right now it's a long book!

Alex Ross 06:27

I mean, it would have been even more unmanageable than it already is. And that is sort of a very much a topic in itself. And it's also, I feel it's less interesting. Wagner's influence on music was vast and crucially important, but I don't know if it was qualitatively that much different from prior, sort of, relationships of one kind of towering compositional figure to what came after, or relationships that have come to the fore in the past hundred years after Wagner. You know, it's hard to argue that Wagner was necessarily more influential on music than Bach, than Beethoven, Stravinsky. He is one of a series of figures that seemed to bring about some kind of paradigm shift in musical language, but there is something qualitatively different about Wagner's effect on the arts and on politics. This just quite hadn't happened before. And I don't think it's happened since: a musical figure becoming an -ism. becoming a movement of some kind, very difficult to define what this movement is, but but a very palpable...

Will Robin 06:30

Many hundreds of pages at least,

Alex Ross 07:55

yeah, very palpable, very widespread, sense that Wagner... You simply had to come to terms with Wagner if you are an artist at the turn of the last century, and that's I think unique, and a really interesting territory to explore in terms of in terms of how music, how opera operates as a force in the wider culture. And of course, we're not talking just about music, I mean Wagner... part of why this happens is that Wagner is never just a composer. He is a dramatist. He is a theatre personality, a producer and director of theater. He is an architect, in a way, he's an architect of a new kind of theatre space. And he is, unfortunately, a polemicist, a political commentator, a theorist of a sort. And so, he wears many hats and only one of them is his music, but it all does come back to music, and none of these other aspects of Wagner would have been of much interest without the musical component that drove it from the beginning.

Will Robin 09:13

And so how did you first kind of begin to percolate this idea that Wagner is not just this huge cultural figure, influential musician, but like that he seemed to, like... his influence overshadows so much; like, what were the first few, kind of, examples you you could see of Wagner's actual kind of like, huge influence on the arts, and that kind of spurred you to want to find all of this other stuff that you've found.

Alex Ross 09:40

Right? Well, I think I'd always been aware of it. I mean, certainly since college, and I studied English literature and also French literature for a time in college. And the period of the fin-de-siècle was especially interesting me... interesting to me, has always been. And so I was very much aware of Wagner's influence on symbolist poetry, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, certainly on Anglo-American modernism, Joyce was ... ended up being the subject of my senior thesis in college. It didn't actually address Wagner per se at that time, but I was very much aware of it. And so these examples were already in my mind as I began to go about planning this project. And then I realized it was actually even more extensive than I had suspected. There, you know... I sort of set up this pretty huge reading list. And then I kept adding to it. And...

Will Robin 10:51

Do you have like a document on your computer that was like the original reading... like, I mean, the amount of books you cite in this book is kind of insane, not just the secondary literature but like the novels.

Alex Ross 11:03

Yeah, yeah. No, it's ... I didn't actually keep track. Maybe I should have... but certainly I read hundreds and hundreds of books, read or re-read. I mean, some ... I'd already read Ulysses.

Will Robin 11:16

But like the weird stuff that's only in French and that is clearly not very ...

Alex Ross 11:20

Yeah, I mean, and you know part of it was, I mean, I think it took ... ended up taking 10 years or even 12 years, kind of, from when I first set out the plan for the book in 2008, was because the reading was a huge pleasure. It was a great education and re-education to revisit this literature. You know, I'd read several novels by Willa Cather and Virginia Woolf, but not all of them, and so I sat down and read all of them, and I had actually recently completed, before undertaking the book, making my way through all of Proust. But there were several other major reading projects of that magnitude in front of me. And yeah, I think that was, I think, I lost a year at least, when I came across this remarkable book, the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique Wagner*, which is 2500 pages long, which came out a few years ago. Brilliant act of consolidating vast quantity of material by Timothée Picard -- the French musicologist edited this book, there are many other writers -- and looking through that tome I just realized, oh my god, you know, there's ... there are French Twentieth-century novelists I haven't ... I've never even heard of, you know, who, you know, wrote novels set at Bayreuth or, you know, poets who wrote sonnets about Wagner characters, and I obviously could never encompass it all, but I thought part of what this book could do would be to reach beyond the obvious examples, which actually aren't too obvious to many people, it comes as news that Wagner had this kind of effect on Joyce, on Wolff, and many others, to a lot of people. But these other figures, you know, at least to dip my toe in and to sample what's there, to get a flavor of just the texture of this period when Wagner was so ubiquitous. I mean, I compare it to, you know, growing up in the 1960s. And you know, you just had to listen to the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones and Dylan. You just had to be conversant with it and to be a sort of intelligent, young person at the turn of the century, you had to have a position on Wagner -- Yeah, you could hate Wagner, you could be skeptical or sort of have some provocative take on him. But you did have to have a position. And so that's the dynamic that became really interesting to me just in terms of the conversations, the general tenor of how people were approaching Wagner in that period.

Will Robin 14:24

And so the book starts with Wagner's death and goes all the way basically to the present. And you touch on Wagner and Nietzsche, I mean, each chapter kind of deals with a different set of Wagnerisms, but it seems maybe that Wagnerism first settles in France kind of in a major way. So can you talk a little bit about what the culture is around Baudelaire and the symbolist poets that ... kind of why Wagner takes such significant hold in that period for this group of artists and help ... kind of leads to this emergence of a kind of French literary modernism?

Alex Ross 14:57

Yeah, this is why...

Will Robin 15:00

This is a more obvious I guess, Wagnerism ...

Alex Ross 15:03

Yeah but it's huge. It was a huge phenomenon in France, and it's why I'm writing the book. It's why Wagnerism exists in a meaningful sense is because of French reaction because beginning with Baudelaire, actually even before Baudelaire, French poets and novelists and artists used Wagner to their own ends in a very specific and very vibrant, in an interesting way.

Will Robin 15:37

So is that ... I guess I should have said, what is Wagnerism too; but is that kind of the idea of Wagnerism is using Wagner for your own ends in some sense?

Alex Ross 15:46

Oh very much, yeah, Wagner becomes a mirror in many cases. I mean, the... one interesting thread of the book is how, for me, how Wagner keeps disappearing or how Wagner's own concerns keep getting marginalized. And so very often, when I'm talking about "Wagner", in the book, it's this sort of phantom presence, who exists, you know, it's very much these different Wagners who have been invented by the artists by the so-called Wagnerians, and by Cosima Wagner. I mean, that's another thread through the book is how Cosima [Wagner's widow] created an icon of Wagner at Bayreuth, which superseded the real man to begin with. And then, you know, Wagner himself was so wildly contradictory and multiplicitous that you're never going to, you know, track down the real Wagner. And that's just completely not my concern. And it's actually liberating to write about Wagner, without feeling the need to answer a bunch of these questions in a definitive way. It's just not my problem.

Will Robin 16:53

Well, I mean, I feel like I remember seeing some tweets like about your book at some point, like, why do we need another book about Wagner? And I mean, I guess It's like not a book about Wagner obviously, it's both somehow. Yeah.

Alex Ross 17:06

Yeah, right -- It's around Wagner. And so, but the interesting question is why does this happen? And especially in France, why is Wagner reinvented and adapted to the reality of the French situation? And I can't really give a precise answer, a definitive answer, but it certainly has to do with the currents of French art and French politics in the 1860s, and especially 1870s and 80s. As this bohemian avant-garde emerges in French culture, Wagner to a surprising degree becomes an ally. And as these artists are reacting against an establishment, an Academy, a national French agenda in the arts, a patriotic French sensibility, Wagner precisely as he's as he's perceived as an anti-French as sort of... as a belligerent presence, and Wagner indeed, himself became very belligerent during the Franco-Prussian war, he becomes all the more interesting to this vanguard. And ... but it began before the war, it really began with Baudelaire and Baudelaire's perception of Wagner as a dreamworld, as an upwelling of

the unconscious, as this realm where darker forces and even the satanic comes into view; and there's an amazing passage in his essay on Tannhäuser or where he talks about the counter-religion, this idea of a satanic religion symbolized by the figure of Venus in Tannhäuser, now we can pretty definitely say this is not what Wagner had in mind. You know, Wagner... of course, had this ... was drawn to the sensuous and the sensual and the erotic, and part of him wanted to liberate all of this, but the idea that he was sort of actively attempting to create a kind of a monument to satanic energy was really, really not what he was driving after. But this is what Baudelaire perceived, and I think one incredible document is the letter that Wagner wrote to Baudelaire after he read that essay. And he is swept away by it, he is intensely grateful for it. He doesn't exactly say whether, you know, Baudelaire is right about it in terms of any of these ideas, but I think what the core of that letter is, what's the subtext to it is, Wagner is exulting in the fact that his work is being reinvented and reinterpreted and taking root in a different culture. And despite his extreme German-ness and his extreme chauvinism, I think, just as an artist, as someone who wanted to see his work, live on and spread around the world, he was overjoyed to see that, that contrary reinterpretation.

Will Robin 20:44

He's kind of sanctioning Wagnerism.

Alex Ross 20:45

Yes. In a sense, yeah. And very much also at the time when he is still on the outs in Germany and is still in exile or, or has, had been in exile -- he was about to return -- but he embraced that, so I think this phenomenon of Wagnerism ... Wagner helped to make it happen in his own way, I think. He was very careful in terms of how he framed his work for the French public, he encouraged some of these elements of interpreting them; the dream world, the unconscious, that was... it didn't take him by surprise, he knew the marketplace and he knew what elements to highlight. But it just took off from there and then ... and you know, very quickly it is, you know, Wagner becoming a sounding board for these ideas about the French avant-garde but then you know, the ... Symbolism itself, arguably, arises in the pages of the *_Révue Wagnerienne_*, the periodical of the 1880s, and then you have the obscure but fascinating figure of Edouard Desjardins, who began writing a prose ... really sort of invents this new prose style of the interior monologue, a kind of stream of consciousness writing, in the shadow of Wagner actually, very much trying to emulate on paper, in prose, the sense of being swept away into a realm of pure consciousness, as you listen to *_Tristan_* especially... so it's a... It is just, Wagner keeps playing this role of triggering someone's train of thought -- perhaps they would have come up with all of these ideas without Wagner, but Wagner is just a convenient kind of signpost or sort of a figure whom you can cite, as, you know, as approving... as a sort of give... creates a precedent, a kind of a green light to sort of go in a certain direction. So the causality of it is obscure, and you're never going to sort of say, well, would symbolism have arisen, you know, without Wagner? But whatever the precise role is, Wagner is completely ubiquitous in this culture in France.

Will Robin 23:35

What about shifting to the United States a little bit? I mean, one of the more interesting, I mean, it's all really fascinating to me, but I guess, you know, symbolism being maybe a more clear and obvious connection, but there's also Wagner as influence on the origins of the American, kind of, cowboy story, right. Can you talk a little bit about how that plays out?

Alex Ross 23:53

Yeah, again, pretty indirect. And, you know, it's, you can't really sort of say that Wagner inspired the Cowboys. Cowboys did already exist independent of Wagner. But there is this figure Owen Wister, who was a musically gifted young man who wanted to be a composer. And he actually went to Bayreuth in 1882 and was present at the premiere of Parsifal. He didn't meet Wagner, but he did meet Liszt, who supposedly approved of his compositions. And then... he was from a wealthy family and he was sent West as many young men were... this was the routine, Theodore Roosevelt also did this, sort of to, you know, to toughen you up, you know, you were set to work at a ranch. Yeah. Out West. So that's what happened to Wister; there were also the medical problems that were supposedly being addressed by the brisk air of the West. And so he went out there and recorded his impressions, sort of through a Wagnerian lens. If you look at his diaries, his letters, he mentions Wagner and the craggy mountain tops of Die Walküre and various other reference points. It's sort of ... it's how he frames his romantic perceptions of the West. And so then he wrote the famous novel, The Virginian, which is really a founding document of the Western genre, and one in which the whole iconography of the cowboy slouching against the side of the railway station with the finger on the belt, and then like a handkerchief... like he really, you know, he absolutely... I mean, there certainly may have been people who looked more or less like that, but he put it down on paper and it became codified as sort of the cowboy image. And that book... A number of scholars have already speculated, and I think rightly so, that that this figure of the cowboy who is never named, we never learn his name, he's only The Virginian, is a kind of echo of Lohengrin, whose name, you know cannot be spoken without disaster happening. And so this Western icon of the man with no name, which goes on to appear in Clint Eastwood movies and so on, kind of has a Wagnerian point of origin. And, so, this is how, and this happens in a number of cases, I think when Americans are absorbing Wagner and interpreting him against the backdrop of the West, of the wide open landscape, of these sort of solitary heroic figures moving through it, and seeing them as Siegfrieds, as Parsifal figures as Lohengrin, and so on, it just becomes a way to process the national culture in native terms. This also happens in Irish culture, it happens in Catalan culture, it happens over and over again, that Wagner provides a model for celebrating the mythic often imaginary past of any given nation or tradition. And so the challenge is to sort of develop your own Wagnerian stories, novels, operas, characters to flesh it out.

Will Robin 27:42

I mean, this seems to also relate to even the idea of kind of identity groups -- you have these chapters that deal with Jewish Wagnerism, black Wagnerism, feminist Wagnerism, gay Wagnerism ... all of which to a certain extent go against the grain of kind of our modern day association of Wagner with antisemitism, which again, we'll come back to. How did you kind of find those links between Wagner and these kind of political movements around identity? Was it important to you to kind of tease out those threads given how we typically think of Wagner today.

Alex Ross 28:15

I mean, one agenda behind the book is to challenge the very simple and dogmatic equation of Wagner with Nazi Germany, Wagner with antisemitism, Wagner with racism, which is absolutely not to deny that those relationships exist. But just to push back against the idea that this is ultimately all that Wagner is about, you know, and Wagner is about a great deal more than that. So the balancing act of the book in

a sense is to investigate and to bring to light all of these other Wagnerisms without losing track of that central and very dark story of how Wagner does become a symbol of extreme German nationalism and racism. And so I'm trying to do both at once and sort of tell each of those stories without letting one or the other of them dominate. But I personally was very interested in teasing out the stories, particularly with... I think the phenomenon of Jewish Wagnerism has been written about quite a bit; people are aware that Theodor Herzl was a fan of Wagner. I think people are aware of the the ambiguous, ambivalent feelings of a figure like Arthur Schnitzler, various other Jewish intellectuals, writers, artists of the turn of the century who loved Wagner, while also being aware of the menacing aspect of what he meant in terms of antisemitism. The phenomenon of African American Wagnerism has been written about quite a bit less, probably because there's less of it to write about. You can't pretend that this was a huge and widespread phenomenon in African American culture. But W. E. B. Du Bois, an absolutely gigantic figure, a founding figure of modern American civil rights movement, was a fanatical Wagnerian and absolutely loved the operas and incorporated Wagner into one of his really crucial pieces of writing, one of relatively few fictional works that he undertook, the story "Of the Coming of John." And what happens here is, I think, surprisingly, in light of that standard conception, you know, just as Wagner can be a model for American Western culture, Irish, Catalan Culture, Russian mysticism, various other national movements, he can be a model for an African American heroic self-identity. And so that's what happens with Du Bois. And we think it's wildly contradictory given Wagner's racism. But the fact is, Wagner was violently antisemitic, his attitude toward people of color is somewhat more obscure. And I think was ambivalent. He actually ... you could find passages in the diaries where he is speaking in defense of African Americans and criticizing racism toward people of color. You can also find blatantly racist remarks as well, but there's ambiguity there, but that even is beside the point. I mean, what matters is, you know, not what Wagner himself thought, but what a figure like Du Bois perceived in this work, and how he saw it as a model for Black culture, and that's... it's a remarkable phenomenon. The few other cases of it you can find in figures of the Harlem Renaissance, but Du Bois is the main one. One discovery that I made in the course of researching this book was regarding a singer, a contralto named Luranah Aldridge...

Will Robin 32:34

Right, right.

Alex Ross 32:34

... who would have sung at Bayreuth as one of the Valkyries in 1896 if she hadn't fallen sick, but Cosima Wagner did cast her in that role. She became good friends with Eva Wagner, one of the daughters, and actually was ... seemed to have been staying at Wahnfried, at the Wagner house in Bayreuth, as a friend of the family, almost. This is quite surprising -- her father was the great African-American actor, Ira Aldridge, who was a pretty titanic figure in 19th century theatre history. And it is just really interesting that his daughter was invited to sing at Bayreuth, and this was a story that just really hadn't been told; I mean not to congratulate myself unnecessarily, but there have been sort of one or two references in reference works to the possibility that she had sung at Bayreuth but I sort of teased out the whole story of letters at the Northwestern University archive of documents, archives related to Luranah Aldridge's a sister Amanda, including a letter from Cosima herself to Luranah, which had been mislabeled in the archive, and after looking at it for a minute, I realized this could only be Cosima Wagner. And it's, you know, it's hard to make huge generalizations from this. I mean Cosima was

otherwise brutally racist in her attitudes, what does it mean that that she seemed to have this friendly relationship with a Black singer, or mixed race singer, and of course racism so often works in conjunction with exceptions, you know, instead of, you know, a racist can make an exception for a particular figure but it doesn't... it can even serve to disguise their racism. So it doesn't mean a whole lot. I think in the end in terms of, you know, it doesn't sort of change your whole picture of what Wagner means in terms of race, but this is something that Du Bois was aware of, I'm certain actually I never found a trace of Du Bois mentioning Lurana and her relationship with Wagner, but he knew the sisters, he visited them in London, and I feel this may lurk in the background of Du Bois's Wagnerism as well, but that was just ... that was just a wonderful moment in terms of my research to uncover something which just hadn't quite been noticed before.

Will Robin 35:32

And so, I mean, the second half of the book really does tackle in depth, in several chapters, Wagner's antisemitism, its influence on young Hitler or actually, I guess not Wagner's antisemitism's influence on young Hitler, but maybe you can parse it out a little bit, but Wagner's influence on Hitler and then kind of the complicated role of his music during the Nazi period. You have... the kind of way that you get into this, as you have on the one hand Thomas Mann putting forth a perspective on Wagner, and on the other hand, you have what the Nazis are kind of using Wagner or not using Wagner for. How ... what are those two kind of perspectives emerging in the 1920s and 1930s?

Alex Ross 36:15

Right. I mean, one important part of the context that I lay out is the many ways in which Wagner was politicized. And the fact that that Wagner was a major force on the Left. And I have much of a whole chapter on this question of Wagner and the Left in Germany, in France, and particularly in Russia, where Wagner was as often cited by early figures in the Bolshevik arts as the progenitor of a revolutionary popular theater. And so the Right nationalist antisemitic Wagner was in competition with this other Wagner, and for a lot of people, I think for a lot of people sort of generally aware of Wagner, circa 1900, when you asked what his politics were, they would tend to see him first as a figure on the Left, especially if they were coming out of the Left context, you know, and he was just sort of widely known as this notorious revolutionary who had to go into exile in 1849, after becoming associated with the revolutionary movement. And this image of Wagner, the archnationalist, and German nationalist and antisemite came to the fore somewhat later. It was always there and it's absolutely implicit, explicit, explicitly present in *Die Meistersinger* especially, but it was, it was pushed heavily by the Bayreuth circle, by Houston Stuart Chamberlain and these various other figures who did their own reinterpretation and their own remodeling and their own appropriation.

Will Robin 36:42

Early ... kind of the first decade of the 20th century?

Alex Ross 38:17

Yeah, it's a subtle process. It moves by degrees, and you can just take chunks of Wagner's writing and it seems that this is already... Wagner is already saying these things in his work, but there are elements that have to be concealed and covered up and de-emphasized for this, this transformation to be complete. You have to disregard Wagner's anarchic tendencies, his youthful leftism, his hostility to

militarism. He ended up testing the Willhelmine, the Kaiser state. And so ... it's not a... It's a fairly easy transformation to bring about, but it does require a certain amount of work in terms of revising Wagner's ideas. And so, that process was already well along before the First World War, Wagner had become a heavy hitter in German nationalist and antisemitic discourse. But again, in competition with this "Left" Wagner. In the 1920s that image of Wagner becomes victorious in Germany, Bayreuth is completely Nazified really by 1924 when it reopens after going dark from the beginning of the war. The Nazi elements are already very much in charge of Wagner's image in Germany, but you still find opposition on the German Left through the 1920s. And Thomas Mann himself, his great 1933 lecture essay, "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner," is a kind of last-ditch attempt to reassert the Left Wagner, the Bohemian Wagner, the culture Bolshevist Wagner, he writes, you know, very provocatively, you know, against the prevailing Nazi image. And it's an effort that ultimately fails. And this Hitlerian image of Wagner is victorious, and remains victorious today; I think this definition of Wagner remains very much in place. I feel that it should always be resisted, and we should always keep track of these other Wagnerisms because I feel it's very sad to let someone like Hitler have the final word

Will Robin 41:02

A kind of victory over these other streams of Wagnerisms.

Alex Ross 41:04

In a sense, yeah. But then it gets very complicated when you look at Hitler himself, and you know, how did Hitler conceive of Wagner in political terms, and there's a curious lacuna, where you can't actually see Hitler citing Wagner as an antisemite, it doesn't exist.

Will Robin 41:26

Hitler's influenced by Wagner, Wagner's music, even Wagner's politics. But Hitler never mentions Wagner's antisemitism. It's just not in the record.

Alex Ross 41:34

Yeah. Which doesn't mean that he wasn't influenced, but he didn't make it explicit. And that's interesting, you know, and I think the way I see that is that Hitler and other Nazi "thinkers," propagandists, were conscious of the elements of Wagner that did not fit their picture. They couldn't ultimately completely appropriate Wagner as an ideological mouthpiece. Wagner had to be placed at a certain remove. And it was ultimately safer to see him just simply as this great German cultural hero rather than explicitly as a political influence because once you sort of, it's just the Pandora's box of Wagner's political ideas is very difficult to control. So there's a certain restraint in terms of how the Nazis use Wagner. And there were there were Nazis who disliked Wagner for this very reason: they saw him as bohemian, weird, sexually suspect, not quite altogether healthy, somewhat degenerate, possibly Jewish. You know, this rumor that Wagner had Jewish ancestry was alive and well in Nazi Germany, and a source of discord, and Winifred Wagner is writing to Heinrich Himmler trying to get him to put a stop to these rumors, very weird stuff. And so I think this is very interesting to pinpoint, and to keep track of that tension around Wagner in Nazi Germany, it's a sign of the ways in which he is not altogether ideologically correct in that culture.

Will Robin 43:28

And so I mean, this is one part of this larger way of kind of I guess, in some way rethinking like, you know, the art and the artist and this relationship. And I think the book is also making the case -- you have the art, you have the artist and then you have this kind of manifold set of influences that spread, regardless of what the art or the artist might even kind of say. Like it ... you're offering a kind of model for how to look at, not just the art you discuss in the book, maybe but art more broadly, right?

Alex Ross 44:02

Exactly, yeah, I mean, you just can't control these relationships; you can't, you know, even if you're able to figure out, you know exactly what Wagner had in mind, you're gonna never be able to specify the ways in which his own personal views play out and are interpreted, and even more, you know, how the works themselves are going to be interpreted. So, as much of we're aware, and we're all too aware of Wagner's flaws and his dark side and his frankly, abominable characteristics, they don't dictate how the works are perceived, you know, either in terms of people, you know, agreeing with those views or objecting to those views.

Will Robin 44:45

I mean, I suppose a super cynical take on this could say it like, it's almost a way to, like let artists off the hook in some sense, but I don't think it's that either, right? It's like...

Alex Ross 44:56

Yeah, no, you don't want to -- it's not a question of just throwing up your hands, and saying "well, you know, these relationships exist and they're powerful." I mean, I always go back to how Thomas Mann talked about these things: he never hid the fact in later years that Wagner was an enormous presence in Nazi Germany, and not by accident. But he always wanted to bring nuance and complexity into the discussion, and he refused to let go of his own personal love for Wagner's music and his sense that there are other possibilities that exist in this art beyond what the Nazis perceived. And so that sort of emphasis on nuance and complexity is definitely something that I try to hold on to in the book, and it's never the most popular position, and people like to have sort of very black and white answers to these issues, but I just don't think you're going to find them in the Wagner case. And I think it is actually very instructive. You know, as we go about discussing more and more this issue of the art of the artist and the ideological problems inherent in so much of the art in the Western canon, Wagner provides a model for how to confront and work through these issues. It's funny, a couple people have said to me, as I've been working on this book, especially in the last couple years that ... you know, are you worried that this topic is going to seem suddenly really controversial right now as we seem to be sort of so acutely aware of the dark side of artists and it strikes me as just a little comical, because this discussion over Wagner... you know people have been confronting the question "is Wagner too horrible a man to listen to his music" since around 1855 or earlier, it's just generation after generation have been struggling with this issue, and there's just such a rich literature of people rejecting Wagner, reinterpreting Wagner, working through ... apologizing for Wagner, you know, which is part of the picture even if we should reject that approach, just this spectrum of responses. It's an incredibly rich literature. And also, it is behind so many of these relationships that artists had with Wagner, just so often it's ambivalent. There aren't that many major artists who just worshipped Wagner and loved his work -- with Virginia Woolf, with Thomas Mann, with Joyce, with artists like Kandinsky, Anselm Kiefer... In our own day, there is the sense that that Wagner is a is a troubling, but fruitful field in which to work, and something valuable can

be drawn out of this, there's this great German word, Auseinandersetzung -- this analysis and debate and sort of tussling with and sort of working through this Wagner problem.

Will Robin 48:44

Great. Well, that sounds like what we were just doing for the past 40 or so minutes. [Both laugh] Thank you so much.

Alex Ross 48:49

Sure. Thanks, Will!

[Music] 48:50

Will Robin 48:59

Many, many thanks to the incredible Alex Ross for that deep and insightful conversation. You are definitely going to want to buy his book, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*, when it comes out this September from Farrar, Straus and Giroux. For more on today's show, please visit our website soundexpertise.org and follow me on twitter [@seatedovation](https://twitter.com/seatedovation). I also encourage you to check out the work of my producer D. Edward Davis on Soundcloud [@warmsilence](https://soundcloud.com/warmsilence). Please subscribe and tell your friends about Sound Expertise. Tune in next week for a discussion with the musicologist Micaela Baranello about operetta in Vienna. Thanks for listening!

[Music] 50:07